

## **5.0 AGENCY COORDINATION AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

Coordination with appropriate agencies and interested citizens was accomplished throughout the project scoping, meetings with regulatory agencies, and an extensive public involvement program. The public involvement process is a key component of the project and provides a forum to share project information with the individuals who live and work in this area; to listen to ideas and concerns; and to incorporate input received is an important step in the study process. This section of the Final EIS (FEIS) provides a summary of the agency coordination efforts and public involvement process, as well as summaries of comments made at the public meetings.

### **5.1 AGENCY COORDINATION**

#### **5.1.1 Kick-Off Meeting**

The initial coordination meeting was held on September 29, 2005 at the MDOT Administration Building at 401 North West Street in Jackson, Mississippi. The meeting was conducted to provide the background of the project, to introduce the project team, and to discuss initial project concerns. Six representatives from the FRA and MDOT were in attendance.

The conclusions of this meeting included the decision to hold the scoping meeting upon the completion of the Feasibility Study (*Phase 1 – Feasibility Analysis* [HDR, May 2006]), and to keep the six Native Americans tribes apprised of the progress of the study.

#### **5.1.2 Notice of Intent**

FRA is the lead federal agency for the Tupelo Railroad Relocation Project, in cooperation with MDOT. In accordance with the NEPA, a notice of intent (NOI) to prepare an NEPA EIS was published in the Federal Register on June 29, 2006. No comments were received in response to the NOI.

#### **5.1.3 Scoping Meetings**

Prior to the scoping meetings, scoping letters were mailed to all applicable federal and state agencies and/or officials requesting comments on the project and inviting them to the scoping meetings. The agency scoping meeting was held on August 14, 2006 at the Tupelo Community Development Foundation (CDF) offices at 300 West Main Street in Tupelo, Mississippi. Three public and elected officials meetings were held at the CDF offices on August 15, 2006, November 17, 2006, and November 29, 2006. The purpose of these meetings was to introduce the agencies to the project and to present the findings of the *Phase 1 – Feasibility Analysis* (HDR, May 2006). Representatives from the following agencies and public officials were in attendance:



- City of Saltillo
- City of Tupelo
- City of Verona
- EPA
- FHWA
- FRA
- Lee County
- Natchez Trace Parkway (U.S. National Park Service)
- Town of Plantersville
- Town of Shannon
- USFWS

Display maps were used to show representatives the project's progression. Representatives were asked to contribute any information that would aid in the project's development.

This meeting generated the following comments regarding the alternatives presented from the *Phase I – Feasibility Analysis* (HDR, May 2006):

- Natchez Trace Parkway Superintendent supports Alternative C because it utilizes an existing crossing and has the least amount of impact on the Parkway.
- Discussion ensued regarding Participating Agencies and Cooperating Agencies. It was determined that invitation letters would be mailed out as appropriate.

FHWA, USACE and the U.S. National Park Service have been included as Cooperating Agencies for the project. The minutes from these meetings are included in **Appendix A**.

#### **5.1.4 Other Agency Meetings**

In addition to the full agency scoping meeting, the project team also coordinated with individual agencies as part of the EIS process. These meetings fulfilled requirements of the NEPA/Section 404 merger process and were scheduled as needed.

##### Alternatives Development Meeting

A meeting with MDOT was held on February 21, 2007 at the CDF Office in Tupelo, Mississippi. The purpose of this meeting was to evaluate alternatives presented in the *Phase I – Feasibility Analysis* (HDR, May 2006) and other additional alternatives, and to select three alternatives for study during the EIS. The minutes from this meeting are included in **Appendix A**.



### City of Tupelo

A meeting with the City of Tupelo was held on June 11, 2007 at the Tupelo City Hall. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the impacts of the Scoping Alternatives and the proposed Coley Road extension. The conclusion of this meeting was that the City objected to Alternative L due to its proximity to the proposed Coley Road extension. The City stated the railroad would inhibit residential and commercial development along the proposed corridor. The minutes from this meeting are included in **Appendix A**.

A second meeting with the City of Tupelo was held on September 9, 2008 at the Tupelo City Hall. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the process of evaluation leading to the selection of the Build Alternative and to discuss the impacts the Build Alternative could have on the City. The conclusion of this meeting was that the City approved of the selection of the Build Alternative. The minutes from this meeting are included in **Appendix A**.

Prior to the Public Hearing, two meetings were held with members of the Tupelo City Commission on August 11, 2011. These meetings were to inform the members of the City Commission of the study history, background, process, and results, including the impacts the Build Alternative could have on the City. The conclusion of these meetings was that the City agreed that the Build Alternative was the best solution, but the impacts and costs of the Build Alternative presented significant issues. The summary of these meetings is included in the Public Hearing Summary included in **Appendix G**.

### Natchez Trace Parkway

A meeting was held with the U.S. National Park Service on February 5, 2008 at the Natchez Trace Parkway Headquarters in Tupelo, Mississippi. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the EIS alternatives and the impacts to the Natchez Trace Parkway. The conclusion of this meeting was that the U.S. National Park Service expressed preference for Alternative M. The minutes from this meeting are included in **Appendix A**.

### Community Development Foundation

A meeting with the City of Tupelo and MDOT was held on April 24, 2008 at the Community Development Foundation (CDF) office in Tupelo, Mississippi. The purpose of this meeting was to inform the City and the CDF of the progress of the alternatives development. The conclusion of this meeting was that the City expressed preference for Alternative M, provided that retaining wall use was kept to a minimum. The minutes from this meeting are included in **Appendix A**.

A second meeting with the City of Tupelo and MDOT was held on September 9, 2008 at the Community Development Foundation office in Tupelo, Mississippi. The purpose of this meeting was to inform the CDF, local agencies, MDOT maintenance, and the U.S. National Park Service of the process of evaluation leading to the selection of the Build Alternative and to discuss the impacts the Build Alternative



could have on the City and surrounding environment. The conclusion of the meeting was that the CDF, U.S. National Park Service, and the local agencies generally approved of the selection of the Build Alternative, and many issues were introduced regarding the multi-use path, maintenance of the structure, and mitigation of the visual effects. The minutes from this meeting are included in **Appendix A**.

A third meeting with the City of Tupelo, MDOT, MDAH, and local historic groups was held on April 14, 2009 at the Community Development Foundation office in Tupelo, Mississippi. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the visual impacts of the proposed elevated rail viaduct on the historic properties and the surrounding area. The conclusion of this meeting was that the City of Tupelo, MDOT, SHPO, and the Tupelo Historic Preservation Commission would be parties to an MOA to mitigate the visual effects of the proposed improvements. Several proposals were discussed and some of the local agencies expressed opposition to the Build Alternative, but conceded that a relocated interchange would be acceptable as a minimum improvement. The minutes from this meeting are included in **Appendix A**.

#### Railroad Meetings

A meeting with MDOT and representatives from BNSF and KCS was held at the Hilton Garden Inn in Tupelo, MS on September 10, 2008. The purpose of this meeting was to present the evaluation process and the selection of the Build Alternative and discuss the impacts it would have on railroad operations. The conclusion of this meeting was that KCS stated they had track rights to the northbound BNSF between Tupelo and New Albany and the design must accommodate those track rights. In addition, BNSF also stated that they were not willing to maintain the structure below the ballast. BNSF also stated that the multi-use path could only be constructed in the outer 20 feet of the right-of-way, provided that all indemnifications for the trail have been secured. The minutes from this meeting are included in **Appendix A**.

## **5.2 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT**

A public involvement plan was developed at the initiation of the study process, and was updated throughout the course of the study. The public involvement plan included use of several communications media in addition to meetings scheduled after certain milestones during the study. These communications and meetings are described in the following sections.

### **5.2.1 Public Information**

Elected officials, civic groups, business groups, local government agencies, and interested citizens were included in mailing lists compiled for this project. The mailing lists, as well as announcements in local newspapers, were used to notify the public of the study's initiation, progress, and public meeting locations. In addition, citizens were given opportunity to contact the project team with questions or comments throughout the project process. Contact information was located on comment cards and in the presentation materials at the public meetings.



### 5.2.2 Scoping Meeting

A public meeting was held on Tuesday, August 15, 2006, at the BancorpSouth Conference Center, 375 East Main Street in Tupelo, Mississippi. The public meeting was an open-house format. Meeting attendees were asked to sign-in and each attendee was given:

- a “quick facts” sheet providing a brief overview of the project’s background, project team contact information, and the purpose and need of the project; and
- a comment card that could be completed at the meeting or at a later date and mailed in.

Display boards and larger scale drawings with the preliminary alternatives were set up for public review and discussion. Project team members were available to explain the alternatives, answer questions and receive comments. In addition, attendees were encouraged to provide project team members with any additional information about the project area that was not represented or incorrectly depicted on the maps.

Approximately 52 individual comments were received at the public meeting. Some individuals’ comments pertained to more than one alternative, so the number of comments exceeds the number of comment cards. Sign-in sheets and copies of all comments received from the public documenting the issues addressed in each comment are contained in **Appendix B**. The comments received from the public regarding various issues are summarized in **Table 5-1**.

**Table 5-1 Summary of Comments from Scoping Meeting**

<b>Corridor Alternative</b>	<b>No. of Comments Expressing Preference</b>	<b>No. of Comments Expressing Opposition</b>
Alternative A (No-Build )	10	-
In-Town Alternative – Overpass, Underpass, or Tunnel at Crosstown	16	-
Operational Improvement	9	-
Alternative B	6	4
Alternative C	2	7
Alternative D	1	3
Alternative E	1	1
Alternative F	1	2



### 5.2.3 Public Alternatives Meeting

The second public meeting was held on July 12, 2007 at the BancorpSouth Convention Center in Tupelo, Mississippi. The meeting was conducted in an open-house format and citizens attending this meeting were given information about the project and a comment card. This meeting presented the Refined Alternatives as discussed in **Section 2.6**.

Approximately 30 individual comment cards were received as a result of the second public meeting. In addition, a private citizen wrote a letter to Congressman Roger Wicker, and this was forwarded to MDOT personnel for inclusion in the comments for this meeting. Copies of the comment cards and correspondence received are included in **Appendix B**. The comments received from the public regarding various issues are summarized in **Table 5-2**. In many cases, individuals attending the meeting had multiple opinions regarding the project. Therefore, the number of comments given exceeds the number of comment cards.

**Table 5-2 Summary of Comments from Alternatives Meeting**

<b>Corridor Alternative</b>	<b># of Comments Expressing Preference</b>	<b># of Comments Expressing Opposition</b>
Alternative A (No Build)	5	0
Alternative K	3	3
Alternative L	3	2
Alternative M	22	2
Other	2	-

### 5.2.4 Public Hearing

A Public Hearing was held on August 11, 2011 at the BancorpSouth Convention Center in Tupelo, Mississippi. The meeting opened in an open-house format and citizens were given information about the project and a comment form. A formal presentation was given by project staff and citizens were permitted to voice their comments publicly at the conclusion of the presentation. A court reporter was present to document all of the citizens' comments. This meeting presented the Build Alternative and the No-Build Alternative.

Approximately 30 people attended the hearing, including members of the public, a representative from KCS, and elected officials. During the hearing, the public had an opportunity to give verbal comments following the technical presentation and also directly to a court reporter stationed at the hearing. The court reporter transcribed both the comments that were given to her directly and the comments openly expressed by attendees following the presentation. One person gave verbal comments directly to the court reporter, and nine people provided verbal comments after the presentation. The court reporter's transcript is included in **Appendix G**. The following is a synopsis of the verbal comments received during the hearing.



- The project is too expensive to build. How could it ever be funded?
- Concerns about potential safety issues with an elevated rail (derailments, flying debris, etc.).
- Concerns about the impacts on property values and historic resources such as Mill Village.
- Concerns about the aesthetic of the elevated rail sections; it won't blend with the surrounding built environment.
- Concerns about community cohesion; the elevated structure has the appearance of a wall that will further divide the city physically, socially, and psychologically.

In addition to formal comments given verbally at the public hearing, MDOT also accepted written comments on the comment cards that were provided at the hearing. Attendees were also informed that they could provide written comments via fax or email to MDOT. One person provided a letter to the court reporter, which is transcribed in the reporter's notes in **Appendix G**. Copies of all written comments are included in **Appendix G** of this report. There were 12 people who submitted written comments. Overall, the written comments tracked closely with the verbal comments described above, particularly the concerns about community cohesion and project cost. Two comments submitted preferred the No-Build Alternative, and two comments submitted preferred the Build Alternative. Eight of the comments submitted expressed preference for other options, ranging from suggesting that the crossings be double gated to silence the horns, to proposing that the rail line be located somewhere outside of Tupelo. There was a good variety of comments received for the Build Alternative both supporting and opposing it, but a predominant public opinion on the project could not be determined by these comments.